

News Release

Region 5

Eastern Massachusetts National Wildlife Refuge Complex

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service adopts Comprehensive Conservation Plans for Assabet River, Great Meadows, and Oxbow National Wildlife Refuges

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announced today that a Notice of Availability appeared in the Monday, January 10 edition of the Federal Register. This is the official notice that Comprehensive Conservation Plans have been adopted by the Service. The plans are available through the refuge website <http://easternmanwrcomplex.fws.gov/plans.html>

Comprehensive Conservation Plans (CCP), which are required by law, guide all aspects of refuge management. The CCPs provide a framework for management that will last for 15 years.

Draft CCPs were published in July 2003. The Service received nearly 2,000 comments on the draft Plans, which were carefully considered in the refinement of management proposals that were outlined in the draft.

Libby Herland, Project Leader for the Eastern Massachusetts National Wildlife Refuge Complex, remarked "This is an exciting time for the refuges. The programs that we have outlined in the CCPs are important to ensure healthy wildlife populations, as well as provide recreation opportunities that are consistent with our legal mandates. We recognize that some of these decisions were difficult to make and will be controversial. There were a wide variety of opinions expressed throughout the planning process."

Some of the highlights of the plans include improved habitat management, opening or expanding of hunting and fishing opportunities, and the ability to open Assabet River NWR to the public. Some other changes that will occur in the near future include prohibiting dogs from the refuges and charging an entrance fee at certain refuge locations.

It is important to note that these changes will not occur overnight. The staff at the refuge have the authority to implement the programs outlined in the CCPs, but it will take time. As these changes take place, there will be additional information provided and adequate notice given to the public to inform them in advance of the changes.

Herland stated, "It has taken a lot of effort and time to get to this point, but the on-the-ground work really starts now. We have been working internally to get ready for many of these changes."

The opening of Assabet River NWR is particularly exciting. The Friends of Assabet NWR have been working hard with the refuge staff to make the refuge safe for the public. Buildings have been torn down, razor wire and obstacle courses have been removed, and trails have been lined with wood chips. Barbara Volkle, president of the Friends group says "The release of this document is an important milestone for the Assabet River NWR and one that we have eagerly awaited. We welcome the completion of this planning phase and the beginning of the implementation of this plan. The Friends of Assabet River NWR look forward to continuing to work with refuge staff to provide programs for the public, to promote local support and stewardship for the refuge, and to promote a biologically diverse and healthy landscape. We hope to see part of the refuge open to the public soon."

One of the controversial decisions was the decision to open the refuges to hunting. Opposition to hunting on the refuges is

strong, which is not surprising given the suburban nature of the area and the lack of hunting opportunities currently available in many of the surrounding towns. However, a large number of individuals, sportsmen's groups, and the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife are happy to add these areas to the list of lands that will be open for hunting. Hunting on refuges is a priority use for the Service when it is shown to be compatible with refuge purposes. Hunting will not begin on the refuges until October 2005 and will be closely monitored.

Dog walking is an activity that has been occurring on Great Meadows and Oxbow NWRs for a number of years. The refuges will no longer allow dogs on or off leash. The refuge will begin an awareness campaign before fully implementing the new regulations. "Certainly, there will be a phase in period. We want to make people aware of the changes and give them an opportunity to adjust. It was a tough decision, but one that was made for the benefit of the wildlife, in particular birds and turtles, at the refuge" said Herland.

The CCPs are available on-line by visiting the Complex website, <http://easternmanwrcomplex.fws.gov/plan>. It is also available on compact disk or hard copy. The on-line and compact disk files are in color; while the print version will be black and white. If you would like a disk or hard copy, please contact Refuge Planner, Bill Perry. You can reach him by email at Bill_Perry@fws.gov or phone at 413-253-8371 or mail at Eastern Massachusetts National Wildlife Refuge Complex, 73 Weir Hill Rd., Sudbury, MA 01776.

